

# The Mysterious Ways of Wang Foo By Sidney C. Partridge

## The Golden Carp

NO European student of China and its ways has ever successfully completed the list of the many and various uses to which its wonderful plant, the bamboo, has been put. There certainly is no more remarkable illustration in nature of the adaptation of a plant to man's needs than is furnished by this graceful and pliant grass—for, strictly speaking, it is really that, and not a tree. It grows anywhere and everywhere, and with such rapidity that its progress can be easily marked from day to day with the naked eye. Indeed, one of the awful punishments of the early code was to tie a culprit securely down over a pointed sprout and allow it gradually to force its way through his prostrate form, thus killing him by inches.

From the cradle to the grave is the celestial's faithful friend and servant. He is rocked in it in his infancy, fed with it in his childhood, supplied with every variety of utensil from it in his manhood, and finally carried on it to his last "happy home." His house, his furniture, his tools, his books, his chopsticks, his nets, his pipes—the staff that sustains him and the rod that smites him—are all part and parcel of the same heavenly plant. No wonder that they gratefully speak of it as one of the gods' best gifts to man. Over sixty varieties, no two of them alike, are mentioned in the native books, and the literature on the subject is inexhaustible.

"Bamboo encouragement" is a familiar term to every Chinese school-boy. He knows that when a little gentle stimulus is needed to make him "back" his books more thoroughly, the ever-ready "graceful grass" in the teacher's hands will furnish it on the moment. In this he is at a little disadvantage as compared with the American boy, who can see the rod and sometimes dodge it, for he recites with his back to the instructor and—unless there be a convenient mirror at the back of the schoolroom, which there never is—the chastening and stimulating bamboo does its fatal work before he can avoid it. The Chinese professor of the native lore takes no chances with his game, and he generally aims pretty straight. And this is how it comes to pass that a few judiciously administered blows—even in later life—to bring out the truth, are popularly known as "bamboo encouragement."

"The prisoner seems to be a little modest or diffident about answering my questions," a magistrate will say in a native court; "he needs a little encouragement." And the lictors proceed forthwith to "encourage" him with some fifteen or twenty well directed blows, which generally has the effect of loosening the strings of the tongue and enabling him to incriminate his neighbors.

These introductory remarks explain the peculiar phraseology of the suggestion which Tak-Loy, assistant comprador of Royce & Co.'s warehouse, made to Mr. Royce himself when the latter accused the head wharf coolie of stealing.

"There surely is a lot of thieving going on right here under our very noses, and you can't tell me that he doesn't know about it. Of course, he knows all about it and is getting a big squeeze out of it himself. But I can't get any satisfaction out of it. He swears the tallies are all right when they leave the gangplank, and all right again when they get to the go-down with the rice bags, and yet we are nearly a thousand pounds short on the Chip Sing's cargo alone, and she's a small boat, don't you know?"

"Mr. Loyce," replied the comprador, "I think more better we encourage he, how fashion you tinkee?"

"Encourage him! Why, good heavens, what do you mean? Make him steal more?"

"Please you s'cluse me. No steal more. My talkee China school encourage, all same bamboo."

"Oh, you mean to beat him, do you? Is that what you call your bamboo encouragement? Well, how are you going to do it without all of us getting into the mixed court and paying more than the whole thing is worth?"

"Flaps more better you talkee policeman first. S'pose he can savve, all light, s'pose he no savve, more better bamboo that number one coolie."

"All right, we'll put the police on this the first thing tomorrow morning."

Chief Detective Morehead of the Shanghai office was engaged in a private conversation with Wang Foo, the famous detector of crime, when Mr. Royce's card was sent in from the outer room. Mr. Wang had been requested to come up from Hongkong (at the earnest solicitation of Dr. Cortelyou, the United States consul) and co-operate with the local police in their attempts to solve the mystery of the murder of an American subject, and they were discussing the details of the crime just at this moment.

"We will have to suspend the conversation for a while, Mr. Wang, for this gentleman has come to consult me about a complicated robbery case and I know he is anxious for an immediate interview."

"Certainly," replied the gracious Chinese guest; "would you like me to call again a little later in the day?"

"Not at all; I want you to remain right here, if you kindly will, for I am sure you will be interested in this case, and I have no doubt you may be of some very practical help to us. Won't you stay?"

"Always at your service and that of the department, Mr. Morehead."

Mr. Royce entered and, after having been introduced to Wang Foo, expressed himself as especially pleased that he could be present at the interview. The three gentlemen took seats



WHEN THE STOKER STRUCK HIM HE CRIED OUT, "SWIM UP THE DRAGON POOL, YOU GOLDEN CARP"

and the officer motioned to Mr. Royce to begin.

He gave a full and detailed account of what had taken place on the wharf and in the go-down and ended up by saying that he had no doubt whatever that some very skillful thieving was going on all the time—and that the head wharf coolie was in league with the gang—but in spite of the most careful watching, not a trace of anything could be found. As an illustration, he cited the case of the Chip Sing, with five hundred bags of rice. Every bag was examined on leaving the ship and a bamboo tally given for it to the coolie who carried it across the wharf to the go-down, and who then handed his tally to the comprador and received his few coppers cash in his hand. There was absolutely no chance for any tampering with the bags, for they were watched from the time they left the ship until they were deposited on the go-down floor.

Now for the mystery. The bags were weighed at Swatow on leaving and then the iron hatch was securely locked; they were weighed again on being taken out of the go-down at Shanghai and they were several hundred pounds short! Not a human being had had access to them on board the ship—the mate swore to that, for he held the keys—and they had been constantly and securely locked on shore.

The only possible suggestion was rats, but rats unfortunately cannot gnaw through the steel plates of a steamer or the galvanized sides and floors of a warehouse; and, then, rats always leave traces of their work in the holes in the bags and the scattered grains of rice lying about.

"You are quite sure the bags were all intact?" inquired the chief.

"Absolutely so—every one of them is examined, to see that no strings have been cut, when it is brought ashore." "It certainly looks like ghosts, Mr. Wang, doesn't it?" turning to the quiet but very interested listener. "Yes; you know the Chinese believe that hungry ghosts are particularly fond of rice, especially of this fine Swatow variety," smiled the man of mystery in reply. "But—they like it cooked, not raw, and they never cook it themselves, so you see they are dependent upon their human friends to secure it and cook it for them. Ghosts are made the scapegoats for a good deal in China, as they are in England, but they are never guilty of purloining uncooked food; that I am obliged to say in their defense, is a purely mortal pastime. So, gentlemen, I am afraid we shall have to rule out the ghosts as well as the rats."

"What theory or explanation have

you to offer, then, sir?" inquired Mr. Royce.

"It would be impossible for me to offer any explanation offhand, sir—whatever conception I may already have formed mentally—without a careful survey of the scene of the supposed robbery and the privilege of an interview or two with the parties most nearly concerned. Perhaps Mr. Morehead would do me the honor to show me over the scene tomorrow."

"Delighted to do so, Mr. Wang, at any hour that may suit Mr. Royce." When the same party of three met a few evenings afterward, Wang Foo took from his sleeve the leather-covered notebook in which he had entered the data of the robbery, and, accepting the Manila cheroot which his host tendered him, leaned back in his chair, and, looking at Mr. Royce in a strange, quizzical way, asked slowly but distinctly:

"You say that every bag of rice was weighed carefully at Swatow and again at Shanghai?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you found a difference of several hundred pounds?"

"Yes, sir," in fact, nearly a thousand on the consignment."

"And you have taken every precaution and made every effort to find the loss, but without success?"

"Indeed we have, sir, but the leak goes on as merrily as ever."

"I dislike to seem discourteous in differing with you, Mr. Royce, but there is one precaution you didn't take."

"And pray, what is that?"

"You weighed the rice bags—but you omitted to weigh the coolies!"

"Weigh the coolies? What do you mean, sir?"

"Why, simply this: The excess weight of the gang of coolies at the close of the day would be about equal to the weight of the stolen rice. It's like the law of specific gravity, you know; the weight of the article is equal to the weight of the water which it displaces."

"Do you mean they stole it and hid it in their clothes then?"

"I most certainly do, sir."

"Well, when and how did they steal

it? Solve that mystery for me and I will acknowledge you are indeed a wonder!"

Wang Foo put his long hand up his right-hand sleeve and drew out therefrom a slender piece of bamboo about eight inches long. It was hollowed out and the end was sharply pointed like a pen. Attached to it was a long bag resembling a stocking with a very small leg and a very large foot.

"Here, gentlemen, is your solution. You see this is neither 'rat' nor 'ghost'; on the contrary, it is something very simple and human. The coolie who carries the rice bag has this apparatus concealed beneath his clothing. The bag is fastened around his waist and the bamboo is concealed in his collar. When he is given the bag on the ship, he places it on his right shoulder and steadies it with his right hand, his left hand grasping the tally-stick with the comprador collects. Now for the trick. With his right hand under the bag he pushes the bamboo pipe up through the meshes until he reaches the grains of rice and then they begin to flow slowly but surely down through the tube into the stocking. The rocking motion of his body as he walks assists the flow—like good exercise for the dyspeptic—and before he reaches the go-down he has several pounds inside his garments. He then draws the bamboo down into his collar and no one is ever the wiser."

"Did you ever see anything cleverer than that, Mr. Morehead?" asked the merchant.

"It certainly beats me," was the chief's brief but emphatic answer.

"And, pray, what do they call this diabolical invention, Mr. Wang?"

"I am told," replied the detective, with a rather significant smile, "I am told that they call it 'the little bamboo assistant or encourager.' Your comprador suggested a little 'encouragement,' did he not?"

"Yes, but not exactly that kind."

"True, not exactly that kind, but still of the same bamboo, was it not?"

"Yes, I believe it was—a wonderful plant, when all is said and done, Mr. Wang, is it not?"

"One of heaven's best gifts to man," replied the Chinese scholar. "As the ancient saying goes:

"How restful by the waters cool,  
To watch its graceful waving!"

"As far as the case itself is concerned, Mr. Wang," remarked Dr. Cortelyou, the consul, to his visitor from Hongkong, "it seems clear enough to the American eye, but you know I haven't been here four years without realizing that in every one of these international rows 'there's always a little nigger in the woodpile,' as we say in the United States. You are familiar with that phrase, are you not?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, sir, though I am told that in Boston they express the same sentiment a little differently."

"Ah, how is that?"

"I believe they say that 'there's a lurking suspicion of a diminutive son of Africa's having concealed himself in the accumulated kindling,' or something to that effect."

"Diminutive son of Africa is very good," laughed the consul.

"Yes, you know the difference between Boston and Chicago, for instance, in the mode of expression reminds me of the difference between the classic language of the literati of China and the vernacular of the provinces, sometimes. I suppose you find it so in every country, do you not?"

"As far as my limited travels permit me to judge, I believe you do—but to go back to our case: The evidence all shows that there had been bad feeling between the second mate and the stoker for some time, owing to some row on shipboard, and it finally culminated in this Hongkong scrimmage, when Jackson attempted to throw the fellow into the creek and he had to hit him back, as he says, in self-defense. Of course, Jackson was drunk at the time, for he and some of his cronies had been imbibing at that 'Happy Anchorage' place near the bridge and I suppose when he came out and saw the stoker he thought it would be a good chance to get even with him on shore. Now when men are under the influence of liquor, they generally come through all right, as you know, when a really sober man would succumb, but in this case he must have fallen very heavily on the pavement, for the doctor said his skull was fractured when they picked him up."

"Well, where is your 'nigger in the woodpile'?"

"Why, just here, Mr. Wang, and this is really the reason why I have sent for you; the jinriksha coolie and the others all testify that when the stoker struck him he cried out: 'Swim up the dragon pool, you golden carp; swim up the pool.' And in spite of all my efforts, I cannot find anybody who can explain these words. Now, what had Jackson to do with a dragon pool and why did the stoker tell him to 'swim up'?" There seems to be some mysterious hidden meaning in these expressions and the more I think of them the more I am convinced that there's some connection between them and the murder."

Wang Foo looked very thoughtful for a moment. "Have you inquired of the missionaries?" he asked.

"Yes, I have had a number of them in here with their Chinese teachers and all that I can find is that 'The carp swims up the dragon pool' is a phrase which is used to signify literary ambition. They tell me that it hangs on the walls of Chinese schools and is engraved on the covers of the books and all that sort of thing. The idea seems to be that as the carp struggles up against the current of the stream, so the scholar ought to struggle onward and upward against all obstacles."

"They are quite correct, Mr. Consul; it is one of the most treasured phrases in our literary life, and would be instantly recognized by any Chinese scholar."

"True, but what in the world has a literary phrase to do with a couple of sailors and a street fight? That's what puzzles me. They are about the last words in the world you would expect to hear from the lips of a second mate—to say nothing of an ordinary stoker."

"Yes, sir; they are hardly part of the language of the sea, though a